

It is to be hoped that the General Practitioners Committee will confine their attention at present to the devising of a scheme by which the monies of the Association could be legally used for medical defence work. No one wishes them to ruin their health by "spending anxious days and nights" in the consideration of such a number of subjects as they appeared to have done during the past session. "In what way can the Articles of Association be so altered so as to allow the Council to spend monies in the suppression of quackery?" is the vital question which they should give their consideration to; all other subjects can well remain unsolved until they have presented us with a workable scheme for the accomplishment of this most desirable object.

I venture, in concluding, to make one suggestion, and that is that the Committee should seek the assistance of those gentlemen who are conversant with the routine work of medical defence societies.—I am, etc.,

Cardiff, Aug. 31st.

T. GARRETT HORDER.

A QUESTION OF CONSCIENCE.

SIR,—In cases of doubtful diagnosis it is granted to us to take counsel of colleagues older and wiser than ourselves in order that our diagnoses may be corrected or confirmed. May I, through the courtesy of your columns, invoke the aid of such now in a problem of intricate differentiation? I have caught my foot in the rut of conventional professional procedure, and have stumbled forward into the province of moral obligation. I shall be grateful for a helping hand, lest I grope further into darkness where I seek light.

I was called in some few weeks since to a case of threatening abortion. The diagnosis was indubitable. The patient—a wreck of a young woman—told a history of early marriage, succeeded by three abortions in rapid succession, a child which from her description was typical, two subsequent abortions, and after an interval of eight months the present threatening one.

She had learned in the school of untoward experience, and when I found her was already in bed with the foot of her bed raised, and was sipping iced lemon water. I supplemented the treatment, and after a day or two hæmorrhage and all other threatening symptoms ceased. The danger was averted. The small life (she was some four months advanced in pregnancy) having been thus preserved from rushing headlong into a sphere for which it was not yet equipped, I bethought myself of antidoting according to custom that poison of which this undue haste to be born was a symptom. I was conducted to a handsome library where everything stood convenient for writing. I was penning my mercurial prescription, when a slight noise in a distant corner of the room attracted my attention.

On a low stool with its head supported heavily on long, lean-fingered hands, a child of some four or five years was sitting, watching me out of mournful eyes. As my look met it, it stretched an elfish hand up, and, clutching the corner of a chair, made a laborious effort to rise. Three times it strove, and each time fell heavily back. I rose to the poor little creature's assistance, but, with an aged pathetic patience, it had tried a fourth time and succeeded. It gave a deep drawn sigh of relief, and, still leaning with one hand on the chair, with the other lifted a fold of its frock, and patiently wiped the sweat of effort from its forehead. Then it stooped, and, clutching a leg of the stool on which it had been sitting, set out upon a journey across the room, dragging its burden after it.

You could read the ache of bones in the way it set its feet down; you could hear the patience of hopelessness in its laboured breath. But it toiled on, picking its halting steps across the room, still dragging its burden after it, making a cautious detour of all obstacles, as children do who are not quite sure of their distances, tables and chairs being foes for heads and limbs to come into painful conflict with.

It found me at last, and, planting its stool as close as possible against my skirts, sat down beside me with a sigh of thankfulness, and leaned its great heavy head against me with an air of having waited for some half-century at least for human companionship. I stopped short in my prescribing, and looked down on the bulging head and thin hair, the

sunken nose, overhung by prominent brows, and the dull, joyless eyes. The child was crooning a melancholy monotone, like an old woman mumbling a dirge.

I made some slight movement; the poor little creature thought I was going. It struggled up with a cry, and caught hold of my dress. Tears rolled down its earthy face. It looked into my eyes with the lonely desolateness of a clouded mind—a mind whose clouds isolate it from its fellows. I soothed it as well as I was able, but it was a melancholy little creature.

Then I tore up my prescription and went home thinking. It was borne in on me that in that mother's womb lay a child like that I had seen—a maimed thing, a thing defrauded of its child right of health and joyousness, of its human right of brain integrity, a thing which Nature, abhorrent, was striving to cast off. I thought of those other abortions, and pictured the room peopled with some half-dozen terrible little wrecks like that one I had seen. I thought of those children growing up, and to all time tainting the human stream in an ever-widening output. Then I thanked Heaven that Nature has still a conscience, though I had often before had cause to doubt it. But Nature, tolerant because she has all the wide bosom of eternity on which to nurse wrong back to right, patient and tolerant for the reason of her vast reparative power, even Nature is abhorrent of syphilis, and in a spasm of anger thrusts the abhorred thing from out of its mother's womb.

It was true I had mercury. But who nowadays has faith in "cures"? Who, having seen the overthrow of specific after specific, believes yet in specifics? Was it possible that a mere metal should undo that which disregard of great human laws had done? Could mercury remodel the bulgy head, reorganise the degenerated tissues, rebuild the deformed frame?

I could not so console myself. Mercury might in some way not understood so modify the evil that it should not show eruptive on the outside, but the whole range of medicine has no such phenomenon as a "cure."

Salicylic acid, vaunted as a cure for rheumatism, without doubt alleviates immediate symptoms, but the patient suffers later for such temporary relief in a protracted and asthenic convalescence, and subsequent greater liability to chronic rheumatic pain.

Bromide of potassium is a reputed "cure" for epilepsy, but who, having seen the pitiable brain deterioration consequent on a bromide course, can be satisfied with such "curing"?

Quinine suppresses malarial symptoms, but it shatters the nervous system. And so on *ad infinitum*. Nobody can doubt but that the sooner the doctor frees himself of a fetish faith in "cures" the better for the world of patients. We may indeed assist the system in its methods, but to claim that we can "cure" is to depart from scientific truth.

Opium may be said to cure pain, but opium at the same time dulls the senses to the fact of injury, so removing that very stimulus which excites the brain to muster and despatch its ambulance corps to the seat of injury.

Nor can mercury by any possibility so affect the evolutionary impulse of an embryo as to carry it beyond the type Mongolian. For it would seem that the effect of syphilis is to retard evolution in such wise that from Caucasian parents an offspring characteristically Mongolian results—and that not a healthy but a maimed Mongolian.

Do we well when we combat Nature in her effort to abort so monstrous a "degenerate"? Will somebody advise me if I did well in this case when I withheld mercury and left Nature to the promptings of her conscience, instead of abetting a crime so great as that of the birth of such a child as laid its dull misshapen head against my knee that morning?

I could not persuade myself that the prevention of abortion by mercury argues that mercury is capable of bringing an embryonic child up to the desired human standard. I could not hope that its administration would do more than so enfeeble the mother's physical conscience, and render it so insensate that it would fail to repudiate that which it was the bounden duty of its evolutionary instinct to repudiate.—I am, etc.,

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